



# **Our Common History: Fighting for the Rights of People**

by Paige Bradford, Tia Nelis, and Ruthie-Marie Beckwith

## **Introduction**

Over time, members of minority groups have joined together to fight for their human and civil rights. This paper describes the history of the African-American Civil Rights Movement, the LGBTQ Movement, and the Self-Advocacy Movement.

## **African-American Civil Rights Movement**

The African-American Civil Rights Movement started in the mid-1800s. After the Civil War states passed laws that limited the rights of black people. These Jim Crow laws made it hard for black people to vote. The laws said black people could not go to the same places or do the same things as white people.

In 1909, a group of people started the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It wanted to fight for the rights of all people. The Civil Rights Movement was strongest in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1953, Reverend T. J. Jemison started the first bus boycott in Baton Rouge. He started the boycott so black people could ride the city buses. The boycott ended when the bus company agreed to let black people to ride in the back of the bus. White people could sit in the front.

After the Baton Rouge boycott, people in other communities started more groups. They organized to fight for their rights. African Americans met in their churches to talk about their rights and what to do about the Jim Crow laws. Members of these groups came together at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. They talked about better





ways to organize and how to change the way black people were treated. Dr. King and Rosa Parks were two people who went to the Highlander Folk School.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was important to civil rights. Dr. King was the leader of that group. Groups started meeting in high schools and colleges. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) started having sit-ins at restaurants to protest discrimination.

Over the years, the African American movement fought for many rights. Two important fights were about segregation and voting. Until 1954, some school systems had separate schools for black children. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that schools had to let black and white children go to school together.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. It ended segregation in public places. It banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, and national origin. In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. This law told states that they could not discriminate against black people voting in elections.

### Freedom and Independence

One of the biggest problems African Americans faced was segregation. Some school systems had separate schools for black children. Some communities even had separate hospitals and libraries. Black people could not stay in the same hotel as white people. Segregation limited their freedom and kept people from being full citizens. When black people started to speak up, they were arrested. Some black people who spoke up were murdered by mobs or the Ku Klux Klan.

Another important concern for the freedom of the Civil Rights Movement was the freedom to congregate and meet. In 1963, the 16th



Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed. Many other black churches were burned to keep people from meeting about their rights.

### Human and Legal Rights

One of the most important problems the African-American movement worked on was voting rights. Some counties and states came up with rules to make it hard for black people to register to vote. They would ask questions like how many bubbles are in a bar of soap. They would make them recite the constitution. White people did not have to do these things. These counties and states did not want black people to vote because they did not want them to run for office. These white people did not want to share governing power with black people.

African American Civil Rights activists had to fight against discrimination in the area of relationships and marriage. Black people could not date or get married to white people. People in mixed-race relationships were at risk for being arrested and facing other legal penalties.

### Meaningful Participation

Being part of any community means having access to the same things and services that everyone enjoys. Separate programs and buildings that were set up for black people did not have the standards or quality. Black children did not get an equal education. After schools started to become desegregated, some governors closed schools because they believed that it would avoid negative interaction.

### **LGBTQ Civil Rights Movement**

Before the LGBTQ Civil Rights Movement, many people thought that homosexuality was a crime that needed to be punished. People thought being LGBTQ was a disease. LGBTQ people were arrested and put in mental institutions.



The Gay Rights Movement started early in the 1920s. The Society for Human Rights started in 1924. Between 1950 to 1961, members focused on providing services. They worked on educating and making allies. Mattachine was a large group for gay men. The Daughters of Bilitis was a large group for lesbian women. The National Planning Conference of Homophile Organizations started in 1966. It had a newsletter and a legal defense fund for allies.

In the 1970s, gay rights activists targeted science, religion, and businesses. Pride marches became common during the 1970s. They started using symbols like the rainbow flag as a banner for their struggle.



Three big events happened in the 1990s that changed the Gay Rights Movement. The first event was the AIDS epidemic. Many LGBTQ people caught AIDS and had problems getting health care and access to drugs that were used to treat AIDS.

The second big event was about how the military treated LGBTQ soldiers. President Clinton started a policy called Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) in 1994. It said that "closeted" LGBTQ military personnel could not be harassed or discriminated against.

The third event was the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard. He was a student at the University of Wyoming. He was tortured and left to die because of his sexual orientation. His murder led to a push for hate crime legislation in the United States.

The LGBTQ movement continued to fight for the right for LGBTQ couples to get married. Some states legalized civil unions and partnerships. Other states legalized marriage. In June of 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriages were legal. They said that states could not prohibit such marriages or refuse to recognize certificates from other states.



## Issues and Problems for the LGBTQ Movement

### Freedom and Independence

An important issue related to freedom was the right to engage in preferred jobs, such as in the military. The military banned Gays and lesbians from serving in 1945. After that, gays and lesbians who joined the military were kicked out if they were exposed. School fired teachers and other personnel who identified as homosexual.

People identifying as gay or lesbian also had difficulties meeting and having events. The police also harassed them by doing raids on places where gay people got together, and other tactics.

### Human and Legal Rights

LGBTQ people also had problems with marriage. Many states passed laws against LGBTQ people getting married. Gay and lesbian couples who wanted to get married did not have the same rights as other people. This was a problem for people when they got sick and wanted their partner to help them. For example, Karen Thompson was severely injured in an accident. She wanted her partner, Sharon Kowalski, to help her. The hospital would not let Sharon visit Karen. Sharon had to become Karen's guardian so she could help her.

States would not let Gay and lesbian couples adopt children. If their partner had children and the partner died, the children were taken away. People were also denied the right to adopt children or lost the children if their partner passed away.

The LGBTQ movement also led the fight for health care because of the AIDS epidemic.

### Meaningful Participation



LGBTQ people were denied meaningful participation across settings. Military service was illegal. The government forced LGBTQ employees to resign. College professors were the victims of lengthy and harmful interrogations. LGBTQ people were put into institutions.

## Self-Advocacy Civil Rights Movement

For hundreds of years, people with intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD) had labels like retarded or moron. Some people thought they were dangerous. Parents were told to put these children in institutions.

The self-advocacy civil rights movement started because people with I/DD did not want to be called these labels. In the 1960's a group of people with I/DD in Europe started clubs to plan outings in the community. They made their own choices and mistakes. Then the Swedish Parents' Association had a national conference for the people in these clubs. They came together to talk about their lives and concerns.



In 1973, the "First Convention for Mentally Handicapped in North America" happened in British Columbia. It focused on self-advocacy. A lot of people with I/DD from Oregon went to the conference. The people from Oregon decided to start their own group. They named their group People First because they wanted to be called by their names and not their disability label. They decided to have their own conference. Over 600 self-advocates attended that conference in Salem, Oregon in 1974.

More self-advocacy chapters started after the Oregon conference. By 1975, there were 16 People First chapters. In the 1980's the number of self-advocacy chapters continued to grow. The first national self-advocacy conference happened in 1990. It took place in Estes Park, Colorado. Self-



advocates who went to that conference elected a committee to plan a national group.

The second National Self-Advocacy Conference happened in 1991. The conference was in Nashville. Over 700 people with I/DD came from 32 states. They voted for the national group's leaders. These leaders named the group Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered.

The Self-Advocacy Movement believes that people with I/DD should make their own decisions. They want to be treated like everyone else in their communities. Self-advocacy groups teach people about their rights. Groups work together to change laws in their states. They work on closing institutions. They work on voting rights. They work on transportation. They work on how to get jobs. They work on being treated with respect.

### Issues and Problems for the Self-Advocacy Movement

The Self-Advocacy Movement has had a big impact. It works on problems that are the same as other civil rights groups. It also has problems that other groups don't. Most self-advocates don't drive or use public transportation. They need help getting to meetings. Most self-advocates depend on government benefits. It is hard for them to get money to go to big events. Self-advocacy groups use advisors to help them get and stay organized. It is hard to find advisors who know how to help people fight for their rights. Sometimes advisors speak over or instead of the members of the group

### Freedom and Independence

The self-advocacy movement has worked hard on stopping members from being put into institutions. Ray Loomis was a self-advocate in Nebraska. He got out of Beatrice State Home in 1974 and organized a self-advocacy group. He started "Project Two," a group that worked on home and community-based services and self-advocacy.





Self-advocates want the freedom to live independently. They want to have a say in how they receive services in the communities. They advocate for the closure of state-run institutions. They also fight for the same employment and housing settings as people without disabilities.

### Human and Legal Rights

People with I/DD had medical procedures without their consent. They were sterilized so they couldn't have children. The Virginia Eugenical Sterilization Act was repealed in 1979 but people with I/DD are sterilized today.

People with I/DD also have problems with voting. States passed laws that said they were not smart enough to vote. The self-advocacy movement works on voting projects to let people know about their voting rights.

People with I/DD have problems with the police. Some police forced people with I/DD to confess to crimes they didn't do. People with I/DD died because the police hurt them when they had a problem in the community.

Community services are part of health care services in the United States. The Self-Advocacy Movement works on getting more funding for services. It also works to fight laws that would change health care services.

### Meaningful Participation

People with I/DD have problems trying to be part of their communities. For example, they couldn't get library cards. They were kicked out of movie theaters. They want to work in regular jobs instead of sheltered workshops. They want to make their own decisions.





## Tactics

Tactics are activities that groups use to get things changed. Some tactics use the legal system. That is called legal activism. Some tactics focus on laws and politics. That is called political activism. Some tactics use things like protests and demonstrations. That is called direct action.

## Legal Activism

Legal activism uses the legal system to get things changed. All three movements have used the legal system to get things changed. issues described above.

The African-American Civil Rights Movement used the legal system to fight discrimination. The NAACP launched a campaign in 1930 to change policies and practices. During the 1930s and 1940s they filed lawsuits to get more rights.

In one case, *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) was about Richard and Mildred Loving. They were an interracial couple who lived in Virginia. Virginia had a law that said black people could not marry white people. They sued and won the right to get married.

One of the most famous cases is *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). In this case, the Supreme Court ruled that black children could go to the same schools as white children.



The LGBTQ Movement has used the court system to fight discrimination, too. In 1962, the California Supreme Court overturned two convictions for same-sex encounters that happened in a bathroom. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act included people with AIDS. In 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that LGBTQ people had the right to get married.



Self-Advocacy Movement groups have filed lawsuits, too. People First of Tennessee filed three lawsuits to close institutions in 1991 and 1994. People First of California and Washington joined lawsuits against institutions, too.

Two self-advocates named Lois Curtis and Elaine Wilson filed a lawsuit to get out of a Georgia institution. The Supreme Court ruled in 1999 that they had the right to live in the community. This ruling was called the Olmstead decision. This decision has been used by other advocates to stop segregation.

## Legislative and Political Activism

The first law against discrimination was the Civil Rights Act of 1886. It said that all people born in the United States were citizens regardless of race. The 15th Amendment of the Constitution gave black people right to vote. Another important law is Executive Order 8802. It said that the defense industry could not discriminate.

The LGBTQ Movement worked to get LGBTQ people elected. It advocated with government officials to change policies. Members of the LGBTQ Movement used “zaps” to put government officials on the spot. Zaps were used to embarrass people and put them on the spot. A famous Zap happened when LGBTQ activists threw a pie in the face of Anita Bryant because she led an anti-gay campaign.

The Self-Advocacy Movement used political activism to fight segregation. In Nebraska, a boy named Johnathan Allen lived in an institution. He had bruises that no one could explain. Members of Project 2 met with Senator Vard Johnson. He asked them to go with him on an unannounced tour of the institution. After that, the Senator changed his mind about institutions.

As self-advocates have focused on voting and other civil rights. They spoke out about how the justice system treats people with disabilities. In



2015, self-advocates formed the Ethan Saylor Alliance for Self-Advocates as Educators. Ethan Saylor died when he was dealing with the police.

## Marches, Protests, and Demonstrations

The African-American Civil Rights Movement had many marches and protests. They had bus boycotts in Baton Rouge and Montgomery. Students in SNCC held sit-ins in restaurants. One famous sit-in was at Woolworths in North Carolina. SNCC also had Freedom Rides across the south. They did this to stop segregation on Trailways and Greyhound buses. Several students were beaten during the Freedom Rides. One of the students was John Lewis. After the Freedom rides he became a Congressman for Georgia.

The LGBTQ Movement used protests in the 1960s. In 1964, they demonstrated at a military draft center. In 1965, they had another protest at the White House. protesters gathered in front of the White House. The LGBTQ Movement also used boycotting to change practice and policy. They started The Day of Silence as a way to show the silence experienced by gays and lesbians each day. The Day of Silence has happened every year for 22 years.

One of the most well-known protests of the LGBTQ Movement happened at the Stonewall Inn. Police raided this bar on June 28, 1969. The people in the bar fought back. They threw things at police officers. This turned into a riot. After the Stonewall Riots, more LGBTQ protest groups started to speak out across the country.

The LGBTQ Movement has had several marches throughout its history. The First National March on D.C. for Gay and Lesbian Rights happened in 1979. 100,000 people attending the march in D.C. In 1987, the Second National March on D.C. for Gay and Lesbian Rights occurred. At that march 64 people were arrested for demonstrating.

Members of the self-advocacy movement worked hard to help pass the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). A group of 475 people with



disabilities went to Congress to protest delays in passing the ADA. They got out of their wheelchairs and crawled up the stairs. In 1990, 2,000 people with disabilities came to Washington to watch President Bush sign the ADA. The first Disability Pride Parade was in 1990.

In June of 2017, Congress tried to pass a new bill that would cut Medicaid services. Members of ADAPT and other self-advocates went to Senator Mitch McConnell's office to protest the bill. Sixty protesters attended the event and 43 people were arrested.



## Discussions and Intersections

African Americans, LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities were denied basic rights. All three movements worked to fight unfair and unequal treatment. They worked on segregation in schools, the military and institutions.

These movements happened at different times and places. They were all active in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. They are all active today. Leaders of all three movements went to workshops at the Highlander Education Center. This helped them understand how to speak truth to power. Speaking truth to power means they would tell officials how wrong laws that discriminate were.

Name calling was an issue across the groups each worked on. Each of the groups work against negative name-calling. This helps them fight the oppression of marginalized groups. Members of each group fight discrimination. LGBTQ people with disabilities who are not white deal with more discrimination.

All three movements will continue to work on changing attitudes about their group's members. These movements have started to work



together to solve problems. Joining together gives these groups strength in numbers. It helps all advocates have a louder voice and make everyone's lives better.



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